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Presentations of borderline personality disorder in the UK press: A corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Manuscript in preparation)

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Abstract

People with borderline personality disorder are exposed to stigma and discrimination towards mental illness, which impacts on their quality of life and recovery. Through the use of corpus-assisted discourse analysis, this presentation explores the discursive constructions of borderline personality disorder in the UK Press. The corpus included 2,139 articles (with total count of 1,868,320 words) from the first mentioning of the term “borderline personality disorder” in 1990, until 2016.

An initial analysis of frequent key words indicated that discourses were highly gendered with significantly more references to women than men – “*her*” (23,820), “*she*” (22,539) vs. “*he*” (11,382), “*his*” (9,691), which is consistent with women being associated with borderline personality disorder (Becker, 1997). Women’s identities were often described through familial relationship – “*her mother*” (871), “*her daughter*” (591), “*her family*” (567), “*her son*” (470) and “*her father*” (405) – and women’s ownership status was restrained to simplistic existential themes – “*her life*” (1,179), “*her death*” (860), “*her problems*” (124). Suicide was more frequently reported in relation to women – “*took (119), take (94), end (32), taken (40) her life*” or “*jumped (56) to her death*”, compared to men. Women are also more often reported of having killed their own mother – e.g., “*killed (46), stabbing (39), killing (23) her mother*”, whereas in men, mothers were implicitly or explicitly blamed – e.g., “*his mother was jailed*”, “*his mother was an alcoholic*”, “*his mother was largely to blame*”, which alludes to parental conflicts as the cause of developing borderline personality disorder (Whalen et al., 2014). Although early parental losses and trauma were reported in both women and men, women were found to have continuous parental dependencies and conflicts – “*her parents did take her back into their home*”, “*was thrown out of her home by her own parents*”. In relation to the immediate home environment, women were also passive victims of others’ coercive or destructive behaviour – e.g., “*she was taken from her home*”, “*she was raped on her way home*”.

In summary, the results of this initial semantic analysis showed that newspaper articles present stereotypical gender-based differences of borderline personality disorder, which reinforce public’s negative ideologies towards mental illness and may also interfere with clinical perceptions.